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Kissinger and Schlesinger

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The word from Henry Kissinger, passed by a journalist friend, is that the Secretary of State faces an interior challenge of "crisis" dimensions from Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger in making foreign policy. This is juicy Washington stuff. It's indicative of where we are in the world, too.

The interesting question it raises—and this is already a matter of lively concern in the whole foreign affairs community—is whether President Nixon is hinting that the United States, while hoping to cooperate and improve relations with the Russians, has the resources to make its way in the world without cooperating with them. There is not necessarily a contradiction between those general lines, which are front and back of the same policy, but there is a vital nuance all the same. Europeans are especially sensitive to it.

The Russians, one notes, have been quick to pick this up. They have begun zeroing in on Schlesinger by name, most recently for his suggestion that, if NATO is weak, the Soviets could "bring political pressure to bear against Western Europe." Kissinger, who has said the same more delicately, still gets the kid-glove treatment in Moscow.

The intriguing thing is that, by a friend's account, Kissinger, an international celebrity coming off a Nobel Prize in Vietnam and a huge personal triumph in the Mideast, feels that his authority is threatened by a truly obscure bureaucrat who is a homebody to boot.

Partly it may be that Schlesinger is a more substantial figure than any that Kissinger has previously dealt with in the national security apparatus. Melvin Laird, the only other man worth counting, concentrated on withdrawing from Vietnam and paid relatively little heed to the first-term horses which Kissinger rode to clout and renown: the Peking and Moscow

breakthroughs, and the Vietnam negotiations.

Schlesinger, though he has been barely half a year in the Pentagon, arrived with a formidable substantive knowledge of what is emerging as the "big" national security issue of the second Nixon term—strategic arms. Previously Kissinger monopolized this issue with his intellectual, bureaucratic and public relations razzle dazzle. As a former defense intellectual at Rand with experience since at the top of OMB, AEC and CIA, Schlesinger breaks the monopoly.

Moreover, he arrived at the Pentagon just as doubts were escalating across the political spectrum about the enduring value and viability of some of the first-term achievements often identified with Kissinger: the Vietnam agreement, SALT I and Soviet-American detente. These doubts may yet be eased but, until they are, it is only to be expected that a certain amount of the loose deference available in this town will flow from the upbeat Kissinger to the more somber Schlesinger.

Kissinger represents the idea that the nations that count can be brought into a certain stable relationship, a "structure of peace." This is the sense in which Schlesinger calls Kissinger a "diplomatist," defined by Webster as "one who is dexterous, tactful, or artful in meeting situations without arousing antagonism." The Mideast affords plenty of scope still for a "diplomatist." But the sag of detente and the messiness of the energy crisis, which lends itself poorly to flashy crisis management or secret diplomacy, make the going somewhat rough for Kissinger these days.

By contrast, Schlesinger has spent much of his career in and out of government thinking about the size and shape of the force which the United States ought to possess in the world; how to project that force politically to foreigners; and how to win support for it—in terms of budget and in terms of a will to use it—from the American people. In the current conditions,

when for the first time the United States has lost its clear strategic and political predominance and there is widespread nervousness and confusion about where the country goes from here, Schlesinger's hour may have come.

In fact, anyone who looks at the public work of both men is struck much more by their likenesses than their differences. Both are tough-minded intellectuals long fascinated with the uses of power. In manner, Kissinger is smooth, Schlesinger a bit rougher. Whether this will make a difference in respect to Congress, where Schlesinger has a responsibility (unmatched by Kissinger) of gaining approval for a large defense budget, will be especially important to see. But it seems to me misleading to imagine that Kissinger is the sophisticate and Schlesinger the boor, or to suspect that either is more than momentarily the captive of pique.

There is a natural high-low approach in foreign affairs. One man holds the carrot, the other the stick. In this case it's Kissinger and Schlesinger. Other can say whether there is personal tension between them. I would say just that there is a professional tension which is not only unavoidable but essential. Mr. Nixon and the rest of us are fortunate to have two such talented men in the government's service.